

## ***FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** June 5, 2013

**Agenda Item:** Bighorn Sheep HD304 Closure

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Approval of Final Rule

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

### **Background**

The bighorn sheep population in HD304 is experiencing a pneumonia die-off, with a 35 percent decline in the population due to mortalities between mid-February and late March, 2013. Only two mature rams were observed on a recent survey. At this time, the HD304 bighorn sheep population cannot support hunting.

FWP recommends closing the hunting district. Hunting opportunity is very limited and will likely decline further due to additional mortality. Additionally, because the season structure provides an either-sex license, the successful applicant would have the option of harvesting a ewe. In the midst of a die-off, allowing ewe harvest is not biologically justified and is not likely to be viewed favorably by sportsmen and other public.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

This proposed closure was discussed with the Park County Rod & Gun Club; with the directors of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation and the National Wild Sheep Foundation; as well as with a number of local sportsmen and landowners and has met with support. The formal public comment period will extend through 5 p.m., May 27. As of May 21, FWP received 6 comments that demonstrated some support the proposal. Any additional comments will be sent to the Commission.

### **Alternatives and Analysis**

If this proposed rule is adopted, FWP will contact applicants and allow them the opportunity to apply for other bighorn sheep hunts. The alternative solution is to leave the hunting district open and inform the successful applicant of the die-off and provide that applicant with the option of either going forward with a hunt or returning the license and redeeming points. This action would be expected to create a negative experience for the permit holder.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends closing the hunt which would be consistent with the population trend, current abundance, and guidance in the Montana Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move the FWP Commission adopt the final closure of the bighorn sheep hunt in HD304, as presented by FWP.